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ABSTRACT

Previous research relating the quality of the relationship with the mother, father, and sibling to adolescent self-concept only investigated social and general self-concept and not various social and cognitive dimensions of self-concept. This study investigated family relationships and their link to the several domains of self-concept. Participating were 77 adolescents between 13 and 18 years of age. The majority were white (85 percent) and from middle- to upper-class backgrounds. Subjects completed the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale; the social support factor of the Network of Relationships Inventory regarding their mother, father, and sibling; and the mother and father affection and control subscales of the Sibling Inventory of Differential Experience. Included for this study were the following Piers-Harris scores: general self-concept, behavior, intellectual and school status, physical appearance and attributes, anxiety, popularity, and happiness and satisfaction. The findings indicated that adolescents who perceived that there was no parental favoritism for affection had higher general, behavior, and happiness and satisfaction self-concepts than adolescents who perceived that they were unfavored. Adolescents who perceived no parental favoritism for affection had higher physical appearance and attributes and popularity self-concepts than adolescents who perceived that they were favored. Females had higher behavior self-concepts and lower anxiety self-concepts than males. The higher the anxiety self-concept score, the lower the number of anxious behaviors. Adolescents perceiving good parental social support had higher general, physical appearance and attributes, anxiety, and popularity self-concepts than adolescents perceiving poor social support. (Contains 11 references.) (KB)

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Family Relationships and Adolescent Self-Concept

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Abstract

Previous research has shown that the quality of the relationship with the mother, father, and sibling all contribute to self-concept. However, these studies only investigated social and general self-concepts, not the various social and cognitive dimensions of self-concept. The purpose of this study was to investigate family relationships and their link to the several domains of self-concept. The results revealed significant findings for parental favoritism and parent and sibling social support. Gender differences also were found.

Family Relationships and Adolescent Self-Concept

An interesting stage theory of social and personality development is Sullivan's (1953) interpersonal theory of psychiatry. Sullivan asserted that interpersonal relationships and socialization influence personality development. Two vital components of Sullivan's theory are self-concept and family relationships. Sullivan believed that healthy self-concept formation is only possibly if certain social needs are fulfilled at specific ages. For instance, during the preadolescence stage (9 to 12 years old) the need of intimacy is being fulfilled (or neglected) by friends and parents.

The purpose of this study was to examine the associations among family relationships and several dimensions of self-concept. Previous studies have shown that the quality of the relationship with the mother, father, and sibling all contribute to self-concept (Bell, Avery, Jenkins, Feld, & Schoenrock, 1985; Conger, Conger, & Scaramella, 1997), but these studies only investigated social and general self-concept. According to Piers and Harris (1984) and Byrne and Shavelson (1996), self-concept is a multidimensional construct made up of both cognitive and affective domains. Therefore, to better understand how family relationships influence adolescent self-concept it is necessary to examine how family relationships contribute to the various domains of self-concept. Parental differential affection and control and the parent-adolescent and sibling relationships were investigated in relation to the dimensions of self-concept. Also of interest are gender differences in family relationships and their influence on adolescent self-concept.

Method

The participants were 77 adolescents (44 females, 33 males) between the ages of 13 and 18. The mean age of the participants was 15.03 years. The majority of the adolescents were white (85%) and from middle to upper class backgrounds (Hollingshead, 1975). The adolescents completed the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale (Piers & Harris, 1969), the social support factor of the Network of Relationships Inventory (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985) on their mother, father, and sibling, and the mother and father affection and control subscales of the Sibling Inventory of Differential Experience (Daniels & Plomin, 1984). The following self-concept scores of the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale were included in the study: general, behavior, intellectual and school status, physical appearance and attributes, anxiety, popularity, and happiness and satisfaction.

Results

Data Reduction

Scores for maternal and paternal differential control and affection were highly correlated (rs = .60 and .75, respectively) and were averaged to get one score for parental differential affection and one score for parental differential control. Maternal and paternal social support scores also were highly correlated (r = .84) and were averaged to get one parental social support score. The social support score for parents and sibling were categorized into two groups, poor and good.

Parental Differential Treatment and Self-Concept

A 3 x 3 x 2 between subjects multivariate analysis of variance was performed with parental differential control (favored, unfavored, no favoritism), parental differential affection (favored,

unfavored, no favoritism), and gender (male, female) as the independent variables, and the following dimensions of self-concept as the dependent variables: general, behavior, intellectual and school status, physical appearance and attributes, anxiety, popularity, and happiness and satisfaction.

Using Wilks' criterion, significant multivariate effects were found for parental differential affection, $F(14, 106) = 2.26$, $p < .05$, and gender, $F(7, 53) = 4.00$, $p < .01$. Parental differential control and the interactions were nonsignificant. Subsequent univariate tests revealed that parental differential affection was significant for general self-concept, $F(2, 59) = 6.85$, $p < .01$, behavior self-concept, $F(2, 59) = 8.59$, $p < .01$, physical appearance and attributes self-concept, $F(2, 59) = 5.06$, $p < .01$, popularity self-concept, $F(2, 59) = 5.60$, $p < .01$, and happiness and satisfaction self-concept, $F(2, 59) = 5.83$, $p < .01$. Tukey tests found that adolescents who perceived that there was no parental favoritism had higher general self-concepts, behavior self-concepts, and happiness and satisfaction self-concepts than adolescents who perceived that they were unfavored, $ps < .05$. Furthermore, adolescents who perceived that there was no parental favoritism had higher physical appearance and attributes self-concepts and popularity self-concepts than adolescents who perceived that they were favored, $ps < .05$. No other differences were found.

For gender, subsequent univariate tests revealed that females had higher behavior self-concepts than males, $F(1, 59) = 7.80$, $p < .01$, and males had higher anxiety self-concepts than females, $F(1, 59) = 5.99$, $p < .05$. The higher the score on anxiety self-concept, the lower the number of anxious behaviors.

Family Relationships and Self-Concept

Using Wilks' criterion, a 2 x 2 x 2 between subjects multivariate analysis of variance was performed with parental social support (poor, good), sibling social support (poor, good), and gender (male, female) as the independent variables, and the following dimensions of self-concept as the dependent variables: general, behavior, intellectual and school status, physical appearance and attributes, anxiety, popularity, and happiness and satisfaction.

Significant multivariate effects were found for parental social support, $F(7, 26) = 2.56$, $p < .05$, and for the parental social support x sibling social support interaction, $F(7, 26) = 5.26$, $p < .01$. Subsequent univariate tests revealed that adolescents who perceived good parental social support had higher general self-concepts, $F(1, 32) = 13.44$, $p < .01$, physical appearance and attributes self-concepts, $F(1, 32) = 6.42$, $p < .05$, anxiety self-concepts, $F(1, 32) = 8.66$, $p < .01$, and popularity self-concepts, $F(1, 32) = 11.58$, $p < .01$, than adolescents who perceived poor parental social support. Furthermore, The parental social support x sibling social support interaction was significant for behavior self-concept, $F(1, 32) = 17.35$, $p < .01$ (see Figure 1).

Discussion

Adolescents who perceived that their was no parental favoritism for affection had higher general self-concepts, behavior self-concepts, and happiness and satisfaction self-concepts than adolescents who perceived that they were the unfavored child. The results of this study support Harris and Howard's (1984) finding that unfavored adolescents reported anger, depression, and identity confusion. This study demonstrates that adolescents who perceive that they are the unfavored child may recognize their behavioral problems and may be unsatisfied with themselves and their lives, but they also seem to indicate that they wish their lives were different.

An interesting finding was that adolescents who perceived that there was no parental favoritism for affection tended to have higher physical appearance and attributes self-concepts and popularity self-concepts than adolescents who perceived that they were favored. It appears that adolescents who perceive that they are the favored child tend to have a low self-worth of themselves regarding leadership abilities, physical appearance, and popularity with peers. Those who tend to score low on these self-concept dimensions are often shy and feel isolated from their peers (Piers & Harris, 1984). This study provides evidence that the favored adolescent may experience shyness and negative peer interactions. Perhaps parents try to compensate for their adolescent's difficulties at school by showering them with love and affection at home.

Males tended to score higher in anxiety self-concept than females, and females tended score higher in behavior self-concept than males. This finding is consistent with previous research (Piers & Harris, 1984). The higher the score on anxiety self-concept, the lower the anxiety. Males reported a lower number of anxious behaviors than females. Adolescence is a difficult developmental period when new social roles emerge and identity starts to take shape. It appears that adolescent females may worry and feel more anxious than adolescent males. Females tended score higher in behavior self-concept than males. This study provides evidence that males tend to have more behavior problems than females, but they also recognize their behavioral difficulties. Previous research has shown that males tend to exhibit more externalizing behaviors (e.g., acting out, fighting) and females more internalizing behaviors (e.g., anxiety, depression; Block, Block, & Morrison, 1981).

Adolescents who perceived good parental social support reported higher general self-concepts, physical appearance and attributes self-concepts, anxiety self-concepts, and popularity

self-concepts than adolescents who perceived poor parental social support. This study provides evidence that parents who provide optimal social support to their adolescent children may contribute to the adolescent's feelings of self-worth and security. In addition, the parental social support x sibling interaction also was significant for behavior self-concept. Thus, sibling relationships also are important to how adolescents feel about themselves.

In summary, family relationships were important to several domains of self-concept development. Adolescents who perceived that there was no parental favoritism (affection only) tended to have better self-concepts than adolescents who perceived they were the unfavored or favored child. In addition, adolescents who reported good parental social support tended to have higher self-concepts than those who reported poor parental social support. Sibling relationships also were important to self-concept. This study demonstrates the importance of studying self-concept as a multidimensional construct. Future research should include the various domains of self-concept rather than general self-concept alone.

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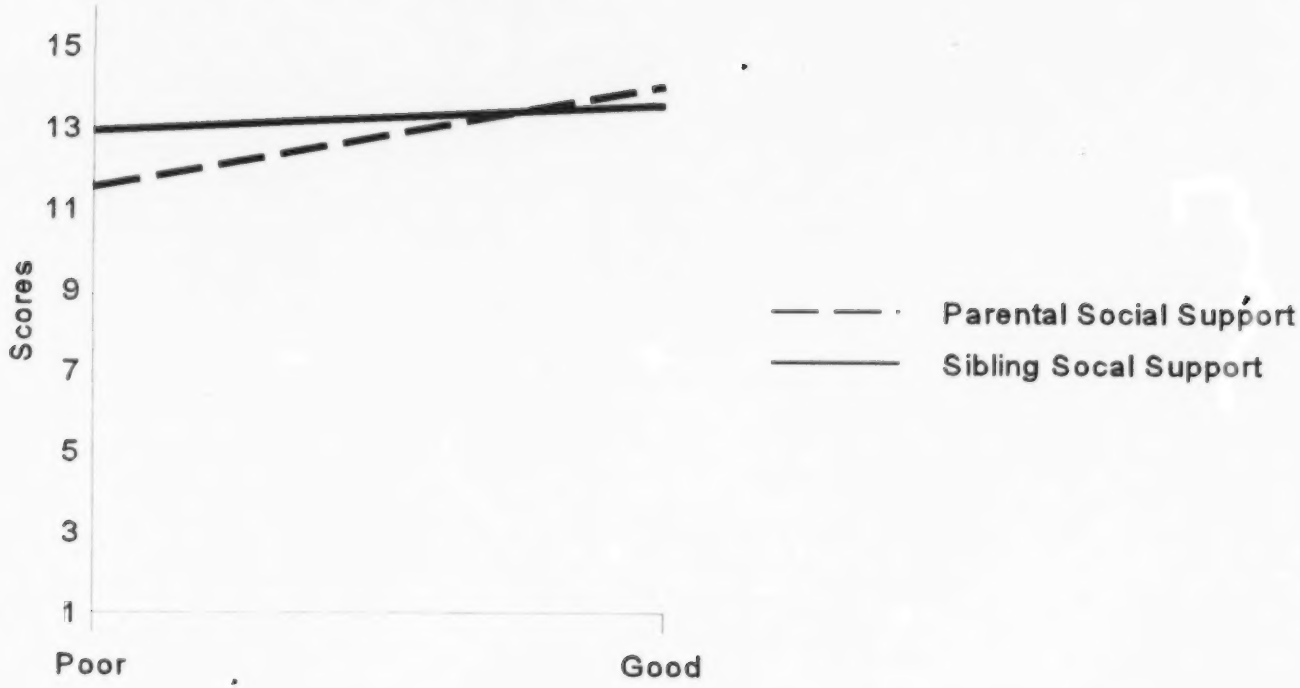

Figure 1. Parental social support x sibling social support interaction for behavior self-concept.